

## Civil War Book Review

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### Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, And Transatlantic Activism

Mark Summers

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## Review

Summers, Mark

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**Silkey, Sarah L.** *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, and Transatlantic Activism*. University of Georgia Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9780820345574

Beyond the Water's Edge: Ida B. Wells and the Renewal of Transatlantic Activism

In what may have been the darkest period of race relations after the Civil War, the mid-1890s, a flaring light of exposure and protest burst forth when Ida B. Wells published her exposures of lynch law and its connection not to lawlessness or rape, but to race. Potential readers who give the go-by to Sarah Silkey's *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, & Transatlantic Activism* because it would seem to cover long-trodden ground, do not know what they are missing. Concentrating more on how Wells's work inspired an international debate, this monograph handles a narrow aspect of that story, but with stimulating effect.

Whatever the title may suggest, this book is not so much about Ida B. Wells as about the transmission of ideas, of British perceptions of American mobbing and their response to her work on the one side, and the way defenders of the South and lynch law tried to counter that reaction overseas. In Britain, as in America, news reports and published confessions linked lynching to a system of rough justice, the victims singled out for their nefarious deeds and rightly punished. A crude respectability, bestowed all the more willingly because the frontier, not the South, took foremost place when people thought of vigilantism, allowed British opinion to grow complacent. Yet even before Wells's appearance on public platforms in England, doubts were breaking forth, intensified by the excuse, new to foreigners and unconvincing, that only extralegal terror could cope with the epidemic of rapes that supposedly afflicted the South.

Wells's appearance thus came at just the right time, and it was helped by her ability to fit her cause into the growing acceptability of ladies engaging in reform movements -- conditional on their behaving like ladies. Made the more respectable by the endorsement of the widely respected patriarch from antislavery days, Frederick Douglass. Wells not only found a friendly hearing, but she rekindled memories of the last great transatlantic cause, the abolition of slavery.

As English denunciations of lynching sharpened, from the South came a counter-barrage. Southern whites were not just defending their section against foreign attack. They realized the pocketbook consequences of a bad image in Britain, from which so much of the investment flowed that a New South desperately needed. Aware that Wells's status as a lady and a living refutation of the image of blacks as irredeemably degraded lay at the heart of her influence abroad, polemicists tried to blacken her morals. More than ever, they tried to tie vigilantism to the victimization of white womanhood. When neither line of attack succeeded, apologists lashed into Britons as meddlers and hypocrites, whose sympathies might better be turned to the outrages just across the Irish Sea.

It cannot be said that Wells's overseas allies created a sea-change. Indeed, a pause in her efforts allowed British public opinion to turn its attention elsewhere, if, indeed, it could ever have been continued. From Silkey's research, nothing shows that the South lost out on investment from abroad to any measurable extent because of her crusade. Readers may find that the book's conjecture that Wells "forced the South as a whole to pause to consider the potential economic, political and social ramifications of its brutal treatment of African Americans," showing that "communities that supported mob violence faced negative consequences" (p. 143) more wishful thinking than anything proven or, indeed, provable. If the British critique persisted and revived in the early twentieth century, it was a harassment that a Jim Crow South found itself able to bear without any statistically measurable effects.

Yet Silkey is on to something crucially important, so much so that it is a shame that *Black Woman Reformer* did not expand its scope beyond the controversy over the rights and wrongs of racial vigilantism. Her examination of British editorial opinion expands our historical knowledge of an area hitherto too little explored, the transatlantic character of reform. With a few honorable exceptions, scholarship has treated activism as if it stopped at the water's edge, and most of the exceptions cover the period before the Civil War, when much in

the abolitionist movement, including the antislavery society's emblem and its slogan, "Am I not a man and a brother?" came from English efforts to end first the slave trade and then the concept of human property itself. Some work has been done on the settlement house movement, less on tenement reform and temperance, but the subject, as Silkey's work makes clear, is far from exhausted and would prove quite fruitful. Without that attention, the general perception of reform movements will remain so deeply rooted in American traditions and concerns that the larger interlocking character of those movements will go unappreciated and, indeed, misunderstood. The fact is, a country that prided itself as an example to all the world and towards which many democrats elsewhere looked for models to apply to their own societies cared deeply how others perceived them and saw economic consequences in losing their good opinion.

Dr. Silkey, an assistant professor at Lycoming College, writes well and affectingly, and if most of her sources are published, what else should we expect in assessing public debate? Even her acknowledgments – the part of any book that readers are likeliest to skip – are a gem: where else will one find an encomium to Piglet and a comparison of the Very Small Animal to Wells herself, in having the courage that, even if they blinched, "only blinched inside" (p. ix)? No student of the least gilded part of America's Gilded Age or of English conscience in an equally dark age of overseas empire, should overlook this impressive book.

*Mark W. Summers is the Thomas D. Clark Professor of History at the University of Kentucky. He has written about ten books, the latest of which is Ordeal of the Reunion (2014).*